

“The House of God”

The Third in a Series of Sermons on Ezra-Nehemiah

Texts: Ezra 3:1-13; 1 Peter 2:1-12

At Christ Reformed Church, we often focus upon the fact that God keeps his promises—we do this because we focus upon redemptive history as the basis for our teaching and preaching. Redemptive history is the outworking of God’s plan to redeem sinners, unfolding across time in the pages of Holy Scripture. God promised to redeem his people from sin and the curse immediately after the fall of our race into sin (cf. Genesis 3:15), and throughout the Bible we see a series of such promises find their ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ. In Ezra chapter 3, we witness one of the great moments in the story of our redemption, when 42,360 Jewish exiles return to Jerusalem from Babylon, fulfilling God’s promise that his people would be exiled from the promised land, only to return seventy years later. When the Israelites do return, they begin rebuilding their temple, their capital city (Jerusalem), and then seek re-establish themselves in the land given them by God. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah recount this tumultuous period in Israel’s history.

It is easy to imagine the overwhelming and simultaneous sense of joy and loss the people of Israel felt when they returned home to Judah and began to survey what remained of their beloved city and its temple. We can understand the sense of loss they felt upon returning to their homes and finding everything in ruins. We understand the joy they felt when they first began to see progress at the temple site. We can imagine the hope of loss restored, and the rekindling of their faith brought about by witnessing YHWH’s covenant promises come to pass before their very eyes. In their story, we too find hope in the midst of our own struggles and difficult circumstances as we witness, in the people of Israel, now back in their land, God keeping promises made to his ancient people (Israel). God’s people will possess the land promised to them once again, they will rebuild their city and their temple, and then they will once again worship YHWH (the true and living God) in his temple as a testimony to the pagan peoples around them. Ezra’s account reminds us that God always keeps his promises made to his people—even when the circumstances seem to indicate otherwise.

As we continue with our series on the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah, we come to Ezra 3 and the account of God’s exile people, back in their land, struggling to start over after seventy years in captivity. Their nation had been divided centuries before, and scattered families from both kingdoms (the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah) remained in the land to greet the exiles when they returned. But even as those who remained in the land greeted them, so did the realization that their magnificent temple, “the house of God” which was originally built by Solomon, now lay in ruins. Their beloved city of Jerusalem was desolate and sparsely populated since most of the city’s inhabitants had been rounded-up and hauled off into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar.

Things were a far cry from the glory days when Israel’s kingdom (under David and Solomon) extended as far to the northeast as the River Euphrates (in what is now Iraq), as far east as the Arabian desert (Jordan), and as far to the southwest as the River of Egypt (Gaza). In 587 BC, the southern kingdom of Judah, fell to the Babylonians, who took between twenty-two and two hundred thousand Jews into captivity in Babylon. But as Ezra reports, there has been a complete reversal of fortune. In 538, the Persian king Cyrus—stirred by YHWH’s mighty hand—set free the captive Jews, who, with Cyrus’s help, returned to the promised land in what Ezra describes as a second Exodus.

But that promised land is no longer the paradise it once was. Jerusalem's walls lay in ruins. The city is undefended and vulnerable to attack. The newly returned Israelites must count on their new benefactor, a pagan Persian king, to protect them and provide them with the means necessary to rebuild the House of YHWH—the magnificent temple in Jerusalem. This is the situation recounted in Ezra 3, as Ezra describes that time after the people have returned from Babylon, and have re-settled in the land. The task facing the Israelites is not an easy one, but one they are determined to undertake.

In verse 1, Ezra writes, *“when the seventh month came, and the children of Israel were in the towns, the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem.”* Nehemiah gives us a bit more detail about this event. In Nehemiah 7:73b–8:1a, he recounts *“So the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, some of the people, the temple servants, and all Israel, lived in their towns. And when the seventh month had come, the people of Israel were in their towns. And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the LORD had commanded Israel.”* The water gate was on the east side and opened into the Gihon Spring. The city's water supply was of necessity the first portion of the city to be rebuilt. This is where the exiles gather.

Ezra tells us that the people came from their towns and assembled together as “one man.” Despite their seventy years in exile, and despite the very real temptation to go their separate ways once they returned to their homes, there is still a very strong sense of unity among the people. These former exiles long to see their nation restored, their traditions renewed, and more importantly, they long to worship God as prescribed in his word (“according to the law of Moses”). They assemble together as one people.

This demonstration of unity is important after so many years in exile, but so is the redemptive historical significance of this assembly. As we read in our New Testament lesson, the people of God are to function as a spiritual priesthood, as spelled out in 1 Peter 2:5, part of our New Testament lesson. *“You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”* If Israel offered literal sacrifices (whereas ours are purely spiritual), on this day, at least, Israel's desire was to restore their holy priesthood which had not functioned since the exile, and so once again began offering those literal sacrifices which pointed ahead to Jesus Christ, whose death alone can take away the sin of the world.

The seventh month is “Tishri” (September-October), which is the key time in the Jewish year, as seen in the account in 2 Chronicles 5:2-3.¹ *“Then Solomon assembled the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes, the leaders of the fathers' houses of the people of Israel, in Jerusalem, to bring up the ark of the covenant of the LORD out of the city of David, which is Zion. And all the men of Israel assembled before the king at the feast that is in the seventh month.”* The first day of the seventh month was both the day on which the Jews celebrated their New Year, as well as the day the Jews celebrated the Feast of Trumpets as prescribed in Leviticus 23:23-25. *“And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to the people of Israel, saying, In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe a day of solemn rest, a memorial proclaimed with blast of trumpets, a holy convocation. You shall not do any ordinary work, and you shall present a food offering to the LORD.”* Since the days of the Exodus, this was an important day in the life of Israel, and the newly-returned exiles were not about to forget this day's importance and their renewed opportunity to celebrate these feasts.

On the tenth day of that same month, the Jews ordinarily celebrated the Day of Atonement, but this is not

¹ Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 777.

mentioned in Ezra's account, likely because there was no temple in which to offer the appropriate sacrifices. And then from the fifteenth of Tishri until the twenty-first, the Jews celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles (booths), upon which Ezra will focus in the following verses.² The returned exiles would not miss such important events on the Jewish calendar when the first day of the seventh month arrived, especially the first year they were back in the land.

In verse 2, we are introduced to two of the key figures in this period of Israel's history—men who function as the leaders of the people. *“Then arose Jeshua the son of Jozadak, with his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel with his kinsmen, and they built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the Law of Moses the man of God.”* Jeshua, is Joshua the high priest, who, as we have seen, is the priestly figure in Zechariah 3:1-10, who Satan brings to the attention of YHWH, and who is then given clean priestly garments—symbolic of our justification grounded the merits of Jesus received through faith. Along with the priests who returned from Babylon, Jeshua and Zerubbabel and his clan, begin the arduous work of rebuilding the temple. The first thing they do, according to Ezra, is rebuild the altar in order to offer sacrifices to YHWH, according to the law of Moses. Despite their time in captivity, the people have not forgotten the requirements of the law and their covenant with YHWH—this is what differentiates the Israelites from all other nations. Having returned to the promised land, the people of the covenant seek to offer those sacrifices established by the covenant as revealed by God to his people at Mount Sinai.

According to verse 3, *“they set the altar in its place, for fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands, and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings morning and evening.”* We should not be surprised to learn that once the people set up the altar, they are fearful of attack. An altar such as this symbolizes claiming the land.³ It is like an explorer planting his nation's flag on an unknown shore, claiming that land for king and country. According to Genesis 12:7, this is the very thing Abram (Abraham) had done when he first entered the land of promise over a thousand years earlier. *“Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, ‘To your offspring I will give this land.’ So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him.”* The act of building an altar is yet another fulfillment of God's promise to Abram, that his people would dwell in the land. But the desire to build the altar before working on the temple is also an indication that the people are aware of this promise, and see the newly reconstructed altar much as Abram did, an act of thankfulness, an acknowledgment of sin, as well as the legal act of officially reclaiming the land which YHWH has returned to them.

The rebuilding of the altar also explains why the people are fearful when they do so. There is a causal connection between “setting the altar in place” and claiming the land. This act, may indeed provoke their pagan neighbors (*“the people of the lands”*) to seek to drive the Israelites out before they can rebuild their temple and reestablish themselves in the land.⁴ The pagans know all about Israel's God, who fights for them and delivers his people. The Canaanites hate to see the Israelites return, because they fear that once again the Israelites will be a force with which to be reckoned. At the same time, the Israelites know full well that they are most vulnerable now, in the days before Jerusalem's fortifications and walls can be

² Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, electronic ed., vol. 10, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), on Ezra 3:1.

³ Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 777.

⁴ Davis, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (part three).

rebuilt. Despite YHWH's track record of fulfilling his promises and preserving his people, his people are still fearful as the rebuilding gets underway.

In verses 4-5, we read *“and they kept the Feast of Booths, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number according to the rule, as each day required, and after that the regular burnt offerings, the offerings at the new moon and at all the appointed feasts of the LORD, and the offerings of everyone who made a freewill offering to the LORD.”* The reality of being back in the land stirs the hearts of God's people. As Jeshua and Zerubbabel led them to build the altar and offer burnt offerings *“as it is written in the Law of Moses the man of God,”* so too in verses 4-5, Ezra tells us the Israelites celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles *“as it is written,”* which means according to the instructions given in Leviticus 23:39-43, as well as in Numbers 29:12-38, where the exact kind and amounts of sacrifices are carefully outlined. According to Leviticus 23:39 ff.

On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the produce of the land, you shall celebrate the feast of the LORD seven days. On the first day shall be a solemn rest, and on the eighth day shall be a solemn rest. And you shall take on the first day the fruit of splendid trees, branches of palm trees and boughs of leafy trees and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God seven days. You shall celebrate it as a feast to the LORD for seven days in the year. It is a statute forever throughout your generations; you shall celebrate it in the seventh month. You shall dwell in booths for seven days. All native Israelites shall dwell in booths, that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.

The Feast of Tabernacles was intended to remind the Israelites of their experience in the wilderness, after they had been delivered from Egypt. This was that time when God provided his people with manna, and they were completely dependant upon YHWH for their survival in the desert. Throughout the week of the Feast, the Jews were to construct huts (or “booths”), which was intended to vividly remind them of how their precarious their existence had been during their years in the wilderness. This also reminded them of YHWH's gracious protection and provision during their forty years of exile in the Sinai.

Now after seventy years of exile in Babylon, no doubt, this Feast had special meaning when Israel celebrated it for the first time back in the land. Once again, they were completely dependant upon YHWH for their survival and protection given that their city lay in ruins. Under the leadership of Jeshua and Zerubbabel, every effort was made to do things by the book, so to speak. The worship of YHWH was restored and carried out in accordance with what God required of them (“as it is written”).⁵ Such worship, according to God's word, was now re-instituted in Israel, and became a feature of Jewish identity and piety until the days of Jesus—one thinks of a temple priest named Zechariah, mentioned in Luke 1, who was longing for the coming of the Messiah. But here in Ezra's summary statement in verse 6b, we read that *“from the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD.”* God's people are back in their land, offering sacrifices unto the Lord.

Once having completed the altar and begun the daily sacrifices, we read in verse 6b-7, that work of building the temple begins in earnest. *“But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid. So they gave money to the masons and the carpenters, and food, drink, and oil to the Sidonians and the Tyrians to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea, to Joppa, according to the grant that they had from*

⁵ Davis, Ezra-Nehemiah (part three).

Cyrus king of Persia.” The work begins during the reign of Cyrus, but is plagued by a number of delays in the construction. According to the prophet Haggai (a contemporary of Ezra), the rebuilding process started in 538, but then stopped again and was not resumed until 520 BC (cf. Haggai 2:18). The result of these delays is that the temple will be completed under the oversight of Cyrus’ dynastic successors—i.e., Darius, Xerxes I (“Ahasuerus”), and Artaxerxes.

The description given us by Ezra certainly hearkens us back to the days of David and Solomon, when cedars from Lebanon were used in the building of the first temple. We read in 1 Chronicles 22:2–4, “*David commanded to gather together the resident aliens who were in the land of Israel, and he set stonecutters to prepare dressed stones for building the house of God. David also provided great quantities of iron for nails for the doors of the gates and for clamps, as well as bronze in quantities beyond weighing, and cedar timbers without number, for the Sidonians and Tyrians brought great quantities of cedar to David.*” As we learn in the next verse, the work of rebuilding the temple begins in the second month, just as was the case with the first temple (according to 1 Kings 6:1).⁶ The entire scene in Ezra 3:7, certainly recalls the building of the first temple by Solomon, indicating that this second temple stands in direct continuity with Solomon’s temple.

But discontinuity between the two temples is seen in the fact that during a time of God’s blessing, Solomon was wealthy enough to pay for the materials to build the temple through exports of grain, wine, and oil. In the days of Ezra, several hundred years later, Israel is in no position to pay for the rebuilding of the temple apart from a grant received from Cyrus, the pagan king of Persia, who cuts the check to build “the house of God” in Jerusalem. This too has profound significance. In Isaiah 60:10-13, we read a remarkable prophecy, now fulfilled by the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem as described by Ezra.⁷

Foreigners shall build up your walls, and their kings shall minister to you; for in my wrath I struck you, but in my favor I have had mercy on you. Your gates shall be open continually; day and night they shall not be shut, that people may bring to you the wealth of the nations, with their kings led in procession. For the nation and kingdom that will not serve you shall perish; those nations shall be utterly laid waste. The glory of Lebanon shall come to you, the cypress, the plane, and the pine, to beautify the place of my sanctuary, and I will make the place of my feet glorious.

Foreigners will rebuild the temple (Cyrus), and the glory of Lebanon (the magnificent cedars) will be manifest in the temple’s construction. God keeps his promises.

In verse 8, we read, “*Now in the second year after their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak made a beginning, together with the rest of their kinsmen, the priests and the Levites and all who had come to Jerusalem from the captivity. They appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, to supervise the work of the house of the LORD.*” A full year has now passed and the work of rebuilding the temple and laying its foundation finally gets underway. Some of the delay stems from the fact that it would take time to ship massive cedars from Lebanon to Jerusalem, and due to the fact that the annual Passover was celebrated in

⁶ Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 778.

⁷ Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 47.

the first month.⁸ The Levites carefully supervised the work, and “all” of those who had returned in the exile pitched in to do the work. According to verse 9, “*And Jeshua with his sons and his brothers, and Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah, together supervised the workmen in the house of God, along with the sons of Henadad and the Levites, their sons and brothers.*” Everything was carefully supervised and the leading families of Israel (those mentioned in verse 9, are the same ones from Ezra’s list in 2:40), were very much involved. This was YHWH’s house after all.

In verses 10-11, Ezra describes the growing realization among the people at the wonder of what they were witnessing. “*And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD, according to the directions of David king of Israel. And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, ‘For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.’ And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.*” The joyful scene brings to mind the dedication of Solomon’s temple as recounted in 2 Chronicles 5:11-13, only this time there is no ark of the covenant, no visible glory, and no temple—just the beginnings of one. But “God is enthroned on the praises of his people,”⁹ and the Levites and Sons of Asaph break out into the responsive singing of the Psalms (the text cited by Ezra is found in a number of Psalms, i.e., Psalm 100:4-5, 106:1; 107:1, etc.). The scene is one of spontaneous joy, as there are now visible signs the new temple is rising amidst the rubble.

And yet, there are bittersweet reminders that this is a day of both joy and sorrow. In verses 12-13, Ezra writes of loud weeping which interrupts the joyful celebration. “*But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers’ houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away.*” Those who remembered the glories of first temple, are overcome with emotion that they weep so loudly their cries mix with the sound of celebration into a cacophony of sound which carried for miles. On this day, there is both joy and sorrow, expectation and disappointment. A new temple is being built, but the old temple the loved is gone.

At this same time, the prophet Haggai spoke YHWH’s word to the people, reminding them to look ahead to a greater glory yet to come, and not to seek a glory long gone and which could never be recovered. In Haggai 2:4–9, the Lord tells his people,

Yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel, declares the LORD. Be strong, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land, declares the LORD. Work, for I am with you, declares the LORD of hosts, according to the covenant that I made with you when you came out of Egypt. My Spirit remains in your midst. Fear not. For thus says the LORD of hosts: Yet once more, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land. And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory, says the LORD of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, declares the LORD of hosts. The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the LORD of hosts.

⁸ Williamson, Ezra, Nehemiah, 46; Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, 47.

⁹ Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, 47.

Haggai was actually pointing the exiles ahead to the glories of one greater than the temple—the person and work of Jesus, who alone secures the peace between the holy God and sinners. But on this day, the people were not concerned with looking ahead. All they knew was that the house of God was finally being rebuilt and that they were back in the land. Some rejoiced. Some were disappointed and embittered. Some thought this temple would never reflect the glory of the former. Haggai tells them that unless their temple is rebuilt, the greater messianic glory cannot come.

In this chapter, Ezra gives us a remarkable picture of the direction Israel's that future course will take—there are those who see the work of God and rejoice, alongside those who are certain things will never be as good as they once were in the days of Moses, David, and Solomon. But this mixture of joy and weeping, will give way to a time of great rejoicing by all the people as recounted in Nehemiah 12:43, on the day when the city's wall is finally completed, and the city is secured. On that day, the people will rejoice without weeping—but this too anticipates the final consummation when the people of God dwell safely in the heavenly city, where there are no more tears, no more pain, and no more sadness. So that all of these things will come to pass, this “house of God,” this city, and its walls must be rebuilt, and in doing so, secure for us those promises of greater temple—our Lord Jesus Christ, who is our peace.